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Survival, Subjugation, and Agency: The Body as a Battlefield in “The Patience Stone”

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ABSTRACT

Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* (2010), originally written in French and translated into English by Polly McLean, explores the harrowing realities of life in war-torn Afghanistan through the lens of an unnamed woman and a young boy, both victims of systemic violence and exploitation. Drawing on the Persian myth of the "Patience Stone" (*Sang-e-Saboor*), a mystical stone that absorbs human suffering until it shatters, Rahimi uses the unnamed woman as a metaphorical vessel for the pain and trauma endured by those around her. The novel delves into themes of agency, resilience, and the body as a battlefield, particularly in the context of gender and power dynamics. The unnamed woman, caring for her comatose husband, becomes a confidante for a traumatized boy, revealing the interconnectedness of their suffering. Rahimi confronts cultural taboos, including the sexual agency of women and the practice of *bacha bazi* (pederasty), challenging societal norms and exposing the brutal realities of war. Through vivid storytelling, Rahimi underscores the centrality of the body in human experience, emphasizing the physical and emotional toll of conflict. This analysis highlights the novel's exploration of vulnerability, exploitation, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity.

KEYWORDS: war, trauma, gender, agency, resilience, *bacha bazi*, cultural taboos, Afghanistan, body, exploitation, vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

“The Patience Stone,” written by Atiq Rahimi in French, and translated by Polly McLean in English, won Le Prix Goncourt, France’s most prestigious literary prize, in 2008. ‘The Patience Stone,’ ‘Syngué sabour,’ or ‘Sang-e-Saboor’ in Persian tradition is a mystical black stone that absorbs the misery of people who believe in it. It is thought that maybe the day of the apocalypse will occur as a result of excruciating grief and agony. Rahimi wrote the novel inspired by a real-life incident. In an interview taken by Stephen Saito, he says ‘Originally, it is not a true story because in 2005, I was invited to a literature conference in Afghanistan, but one week before I go to Kabul, this conference was cancelled because of an assassination of Nadia Anjuman [a 25-year-old Afghan poet]. She was scared by her husband and I wanted to write something about that, but when I was in Afghanistan for an investigation about this story, the family of this poetess didn’t want to meet the husband and I was in jail and he was in a coma. So the situation gave me the idea of this story where the husband is in a coma and a woman can talk to him [uninterrupted]’ (Saito, 2013).

The book starts with a quote by Antonin Artaud ‘From the body by the body with the body Since the body and until the body.’ Rahimi’s novel "The Patience Stone" resonates with this furthering the centrality of the human experience in terms of a body. Rahimi discloses some real physical or emotional problems that people living in war-torn Afghanistan have to face, where bodies are turned into battlefields for survival, agency and resilience. The protagonist of Rahimi's novel, a young woman caring for her comatose husband, embodies Artaud's idea of agency through the body. With her husband being unable to talk she takes an opportunity to make him aware of all her thoughts and difficulties she has had over that time. By acting as his caretaker, she consolidates herself as a person and deals with what life presents to her. War saturates Rahimi’s storytelling with vivid depictions of violence and trauma emphasizing its impact on bodies. Women’s children who are growing up in very horrible conditions become symbols for warring innocent lives’ physicality and emotions. In their hunger, pains, cries and fear they display an unguardedness of flesh before violence and instability. Rahimi also examines the subject of physical abuse and resiliency via the woman's interaction with a young boy who is a casualty of war's horrors. His horrific background of torture, sexual assault and kidnapping emphasizes how the body may serve as a battlefield for trauma and survival during times of war.

The boy's body, marred by burn scars and the weight of terrible pain, turns into a battlefield for survival and exploitation. His bodily wounds are a sobering reminder of how innocent children are robbed of their infancy and humanity by conflict.

Rahimi's "The Patience Stone" deftly illustrates the intricate relationship that exists between the body, agency, and perseverance during times of conflict. Like Artaud's theory, Rahimi's book forces readers to acknowledge the body's persistent influence on the human experience, even in the worst situations.

Taboo around Bacha Baazi.

As the book starts there's a brief introduction to the book by Khalid Hosseini, writer of 'The Kite Runner', who is one of the first South Asian (Aghan) writers to talk about Pederasty in his literary Masterpiece which gained International recognition. Hosseini talks about how Rahimi has spoken about Taboos related to women in his book. The 'Unnamed Woman' is Rahimi's mouthpiece in the novel.

Rahimi has broached a great Afghan taboo, the notion of a woman as a sexual being. A pair of passages in this novel may very well generate protest from the more conservative sectors of the Afghan community, but Rahimi is to be applauded for not shying away from the subject. He is to be commended for not turning his heroine into the archetype of the saintly, asexual, maternal figure. Perhaps, writing this novel in French, and not in Dari, made it easier for him. He has been quoted as saying, "... a kind of involuntary self-censorship has come into play when I've written in Persian. My acquired language, the one I have chosen, gives me a kind of freedom to express myself, away from this self-censorship and an unconscious shame that dwells in us from childhood." Whatever the reason, the reader benefits from his unflinching approach.

Rahimi's decision to write in French rather than Dari most certainly contributed significantly to his capacity to approach delicate topics with greater flexibility and defiance. As a writer, language is more than simply a tool of communication; it is also a medium for conveying ideas and feelings. Writing in French, a language he chose and learned, may have enabled Rahimi to avoid the cultural limitations and self-censorship that came with writing in his native Dari.

Certain themes are considered taboo or contentious in many cultures, including Afghanistan's, especially when depicting women as sexual creatures. Rahimi talks about another taboo in his novella about the Afghan community, i.e., 'Pederasty.' He not only gave voice to the 'unnamed

woman' but also to the 'unnamed boy' who has been a victim of a heinous practice. In an interview conducted on Sept. 18, 2009, by producer Jamie Doran, Radhika Coomaraswamy (the first international figure to speak out against the practice of bacha bazi.) talks about the taboo of 'Pederasty,' quoting her transcript from the interview -

I understand that you have been quoted on numerous occasions talking about the taboo nature of this. Where did that come from?

Whenever I mentioned this topic to Afghans or even the diplomatic community, it was as if I had dropped a big brick, especially in ... official circles. It was as if it was a subject that you don't talk about. It was very clear to me -- and someone actually said it to me -- that these are not things that people talk about, so let's first deal with the war, and then we will deal with these other issues. There would be complete silence in the room. Even when I mentioned it at my press conference, it was interesting: The journalists laughed nervously as if it was not something you would talk about (InteriveW - Radhika Coomaraswamy | the Dancing Boys of Afghanistan | FRONTLINE | PBS, n.d.).

The interview showcased that anytime she brought up the matter with Afghans or the diplomatic community, there was noticeable uneasiness and unwillingness to engage. Coomaraswamy noticed that these themes were frequently received with silence or uneasy laughter, reflecting a social reluctance to address them publicly. Addressing these challenges was seen as less vital in official circles, especially in the context of a continuous battle. This unwillingness to approach taboo themes demonstrates the difficulties in tackling sensitive concerns in Afghan society.

Rahimi's approach to writing the novella in French seems valid as it gave him freedom of expression. It reflects upon by writing in French, that Rahimi may have felt emancipated from the unconscious shame and self-censorship that had been instilled in him since infancy. This freedom of expression allowed him to confront these delicate issues full on, without fear of repercussions or societal criticism

Discussion

The Patience Stone, by Atiq Rahimi, is set in Afghanistan against the backdrop of a war which is not explicitly specified in the novel. The story is about a young unnamed woman, a mother of two, and her comatose husband. She dutifully tends to her husband, prays for his recovery religiously and in the process, begins confiding in him, telling him things which she could never

do earlier as now she has the agency, given the state of her husband. The book is scattered with references to war bombings and armed men in the streets. At the start of the story, the two girls are heard crying by the woman as she turns to her husband, who has been in a coma after being injured fighting. The children are shown to be affected by the violent environment around them, crying because of the bombings and firings, their cries are often not immediately responded to by the woman. The children complain of their hunger, but their mother can only provide them with bits of bread in the house. The woman talks to her husband about the daughters she has been left with. "Without you I have nothing. Think of your daughters. What will I do with them? They're so young ..."

She has no clear picture of the future of her two young girls and feels helpless. The two girls live a scared life in the little home and tell their mother how they are afraid of the dark and hear their mother shouting at their father who they are made to believe is resting. The poor living conditions and an unhealthy environment for their childhood are described in the story.

The woman is forced to move her daughters to her aunt's home after the bombings get more frequent and closer to the house she lives in. The harsh realities and injustices faced by the children in a warzone are brought to the narrative when the woman is faced by two figures at her doorstep, armed with guns and faces veiled. One of them is a young boy with a voice like "a teenager's in the process of breaking" and the other is a man. The man asks the boy to stand out and keep a watch and he stays back in the room and talks to the unidentified woman who pretends to be a prostitute to avoid rape.

The woman looks him straight in the eye, and says it: "I earn my living by the sweat of my body."

"What?" he asks, confused.

The woman replies, her voice shameless: "I sell my body."

"What bullshit is this?"

"I sell my body, as you sell your blood."

"What are you on about?"

"I sell my body for the pleasure of men!"

Overcome with rage, the man spits, "Allah, Al-Rahman! Al-Mu'min!

Protect me!"

"Against who?"

The cigarette smoke spews out of the man's mouth as he continues to invoke his God, "In the name of Allah!" to drive away the devil, "Protect me from Satan!" then takes another huge drag to belch out alongside words of fury, "But aren't you ashamed to say this?!"

"To say it, or to do it?"

"Are you a Muslim, or aren't you?"

"I'm a Muslim."

"You will be stoned to death! You'll be burned alive in the flames of hell!" (Rahimi, 2010, p. 80)

The conversation between the Man and the 'Unnamed Woman' provides a disturbing peek into the relationships of power, exploitation, and vulnerability in a war-torn nation. The Man's desire to exploit and exercise authority over the weakened woman reveals the fundamental inequities and injustices that exist in their world. The Man's desire to exploit the woman's fragility demonstrates his predatory character, as he seeks enjoyment from her helplessness rather than true connection and mutual respect. His acts demonstrate a callous disdain for her well-being as if she were an object to be utilized for his pleasure rather than as a fellow human being. Furthermore, the Man's difference between abusing a vulnerable woman and paying for sexual services demonstrates the distorted moral compass of a culture beset by violence and instability. While the latter may be a contractual exchange, the former is a more subtle kind of exploitation motivated by a desire for dominance and control. Rahimi's description of the Man's actions challenges readers to confront painful facts about power dynamics and gender relations in conflict-affected settings. Rahimi highlights the fundamental vulnerabilities experienced by women in such civilizations, where their bodies are used as battlegrounds for the fulfillment of male wants, via the prism of the anonymous woman's story. The conversation is a harsh critique of a society in which power inequalities and exploitation flourish unchecked. It serves as a striking reminder of the critical importance of justice, equality, and human dignity, even in the most severe of situations.

The man spits on her face and leaves. The boy comes the next day to her with money and asks for her services.

“Sh-sh-sh ... shut up!” and then calm, “How ... m-m-much?” She tries to move back, but is halted by the barrel of the gun against her belly. Waiting for the boy to calm down, she says gently, “I’m a mother ...” But the boy’s tense finger on the trigger prevents her from continuing. Resigned, she asks, “How much do you have on you?” (Rahimi, 2010, p. 80)

The boy forces her at gunpoint to get sexually intimate with him. She is eventually compelled to serve an unnamed boy who comes with money and seeks her services. He puts his handgun down beside the entrance and approaches her gingerly, his inner anxiety visible in his rapid breathing. With her eyes closed, she feels his unexpected weight as he throws himself over her, his actions sloppy and overexcited. They eventually grow still, with just a faint wind stirring the drapes. As she opens her eyes, she sweetly inquires whether everything is finished, only to be met by a hurt cry from him. She attempts to console him by softly caressing his hair and assuring him that what occurred does not define him. Despite his initial reservations, he nods sheepishly in agreement when she asks whether it is his first time. The woman notices that the boy barely has any facial hair and is very young.

His turban has come undone. His face is visible. He has large, pale eyes, outlined in smoky kohl. He is beautiful, his face thin and smooth. He has barely any facial hair. Or else he’s very young. “Do you have family?” the woman asks in a neutral voice. The boy shakes his head no, and quickly winds his turban back up, hiding half his face. Then, abruptly, he gets to his feet, grabs his gun, and flees the house like lightning Rahimi (2010b, pp. 102–103)

The young boy featured in the novella had no facial hair, as noted by an ‘unnamed woman’. This seemingly little characteristic eventually becomes a terrifying realisation later: his smooth face identifies his fragility and vulnerability. Elise E. Racine in her journal article explores the complexity of gender and sexuality within Afghan culture. She delves into how societal norms define masculinity and femininity, particularly about sexual roles and behaviours. Within this cultural framework, Racine discusses the concept of *bacha bereesh*, young men who lack facial hair and are relegated to feminine roles in sexual encounters. Despite being biologically male, *bacha bereesh* are marginalized and labelled as “not-men” due to their passive role. Racine highlights how this distinction between active and passive roles contributes to the stigmatization of individuals in Afghan society. Through her analysis, Racine sheds light on the intricate

interplay between cultural expectations, gender identity, and sexual practices in Afghanistan (Racine, 2023b).

The 'Unnamed Boy' opens up to the 'Unnamed Woman.' He feels safe in the presence of the unnamed woman and finds a rare sense of confinement, which allows him to open up about his trauma.

It's the young boy

again. "No, not today!" the woman says firmly. "I am ..." The boy interrupts her with his jerky words: "I ... m-m-mended th-the d-ddoor." The woman's body relaxes. "Oh, so it was you! Thank you."

The boy is waiting for her to invite him in. She doesn't say anything.

"C-c-can ... c-c-can I ..." "I told you, not today ..." the woman says wearily. The boy comes closer. "N-n-not ... n-n-not to ..." The woman shakes her head and adds, "I'm waiting for someone else ..."

The boy takes another step closer. "I ... I d-d-don't w-w-want ..."

The woman cuts him off, impatient: "You're a sweet boy, but I've got to work, you know ..." The boy tries hard to speak quickly, but his stammer just gets worse: "N-n-not ... n-n-not ... w-w-wo ...

rk!" He gives up. Moves away to sit at the foot of a wall, sulking like a hurt young child. Helpless, the woman leaves the room so that she can speak to him from the doorway at the end of the passage.

"Listen! Come this afternoon, or tomorrow ... but not now ..."

Calmer now, the boy tries again: "I ... want t-t-to ... s-s-speak ... t-to you ..." In the end, the woman gives in (Rahimi, 2010, p.119).

The young boy's stutter represents the boy's fragility, communication obstacles, and trauma from living in combat zones. Stuttering is frequently related to worry and insecurity, implying that the boy's speech impairment may be caused by the psychological toll of living in a war-torn environment and experiencing violence or abuse. In times of crisis, linguistic issues or speech impairments can further impede communication, intensify feelings of isolation and alienation, and a lack of general connection. Despite stuttering the 'Unnamed Boy' confides in the 'Unnamed Woman' and opens up about his trauma, further reflecting upon his need to connect.

At a certain point, the whispering stops and a long silence ensues.

Then suddenly, the violent slamming of a door. And the boy's sobs departing down the passage, across the courtyard, and finally fading into the street (Rahimi, 2010, p.118).

It is upon the third encounter with the boy that the woman comes to know of his tragedy. The cries of 'Unnamed Boy' are a symbol of his vulnerability, helplessness and the abuse he has undergone. He is a casualty of the conflict. He was an orphan and was kidnapped by a commander when he was a little child and taught to use a gun. Since then, the commander has repeatedly sexually assaulted him. The boy tells her that the other men are keeping him for their sexual pleasure. He has burn scars over his thighs and buttocks and is made to wear bells on his feet.

Then the woman's furious footsteps as she marches into the room yelling, "Son of a bitch! Bastard!" She stomps around the room several times before sitting down. Very pale. "To think that son of a bitch dared spit in my face when I told him I was a

whore!" she continues with rage. She stands up. Voice and body stiff with contempt. Walks toward the green curtain. "You know that guy who came here the other day with that poor boy, and called me every name under the sun? Well, guess what he does himself?" She kneels down in front of the curtain. "He keeps that poor little boy for his own pleasure! He kidnapped him when he was still a small child. An orphan, left to cope on his own on the streets.

Kidnapped him and put a Kalashnikov in his hands, and bells on his feet in the evenings. He makes him dance. Son of a bitch!" She withdraws to

the foot of the wall. Takes a few deep breaths of this air heavy with the smell of gunpowder and smoke. "The boy's body is black and blue! He has burn scars all over—on his thighs, his buttocks ... It's an outrage! That guy burns him with the barrel of his gun!" Her tears tumble onto her cheeks, flow down the lines that surround her lips when she cries, and stream over her chin, down her neck and onto her chest, the source of her howls. "The wretches! The

Scoundrels!(Rahimi, 2010, p.119)

The woman's outburst is fueled by the horrific picture painted by the 'Unnamed Boy.' Her outburst highlights the world's brutality and discrimination. Her comments are fueled by outrage and disgust, revealing her deep-seated anger and agony in the face of heinous acts of cruelty and exploitation. The woman's rage is obvious as she describes the heinous crimes of people who have harmed her and others like her. Her use of slurs indicates the depth of her feelings and the enormity of the crimes she has just heard of from the unnamed boy. Rahimi's fierce outburst exposes readers to the brutal reality of life in a war-torn nation, where innocence is broken and compassion is lost. The discovery of the young boy's predicament generates deep sadness and outrage in the nameless woman. Through her genuine and unedited emotions, Rahimi enables readers to experience the agony and resilience of individuals whose lives have been altered by violence and exploitation.

She leaves.

Without saying anything. Without looking at anything.

Without touching anything (Rahimi, 2010, p.119-120).

Following the discovery, the anonymous lady disconnects from her senses in a simple yet significant manner. First, she stops talking. It's as if she had a lock on her mouth, keeping all her thoughts and feelings hidden. She decides to remain silent.

Then she stops gazing around. Her eyes shut or she simply looks at nothing. She no longer wants to see anything, as if closing her eyes can help her escape what is going on around her.

Finally, she stops touching objects with her hands. They hang by her sides without touching anything. It's as if she has shut off her sense of touch, so she doesn't feel anything when she touches something. With these few gestures, she disconnects from the outside world. It's as if she's withdrawing into herself, blocking off the outside world and everything inside it. She is immersed in her thoughts and feelings, and nothing from the outside appears to reach her anymore.

Parallel between the 'Unnamed Woman' and the 'Unnamed Boy'

The unnamed woman and the unnamed young boy in the novella share a profound sense of vulnerability and powerlessness, albeit in different ways. Both characters find themselves in a situation fraught with emotional turmoil and physical intimacy, where societal norms and expectations influence their actions and reactions. The nameless woman, who is normally committed to her duties as a wife, finds herself in an unusual situation due to her husband's vegetative state. While she remains dedicated to her marital obligations, the lack of her husband's active presence gives her the flexibility to act on her impulses and instincts. This increased liberty allows her to negotiate her relationships with the young boy in a way that is consistent with her own beliefs and sensitivities, rather than just conforming to societal norms. Despite her devotion to her spouse, she takes advantage of the chance to express herself more freely and assertively, moulding her behaviours in ways that show her agency and independence.

The woman, though initially taken aback by the boy's advances, ultimately displays a sense of resignation and empathy towards his plight. Despite being subjected to a distressing encounter, she responds with compassion and understanding, attempting to comfort him in his moment of distress. The young boy's actions and reactions are deeply influenced by societal norms and expectations, particularly those surrounding masculinity and power dynamics. In Afghan culture, traditional notions of masculinity often revolve around dominance, strength, and control. As a result, the boy feels pressured to conform to these expectations, despite which he tries to open up to the 'unnamed woman.' His overexcited and awkward attempts at physical intimacy with the unnamed woman stem from a desire to know what it feels like to be physically intimate with a woman, assert his masculinity and power, as dictated by societal norms. Additionally, his hesitation and inner turmoil reflect the internal conflict he experiences between his innate vulnerability and the external pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. Furthermore, the boy's emotional outburst and subsequent retreat highlight the shame and stigma associated with deviating from societal expectations of masculinity and sexual behaviour. His desperate need to assert control of his actions reveals his vulnerability and confusion. Driven by inner turmoil and overexcitement, he initiates a physical encounter that reflects his struggles with identity and power dynamics within the culture.

‘Unnamed Woman’ - The Patience Stone

In "The Patience Stone," the unnamed woman personifies the notion of the patience stone by absorbing the pain and confessions of those around her, notably the unidentified youngster. Like the mythological black stone that absorbs the misery of those who confide in it, the lady becomes a channel for the boy's sorrow, anguish, and trauma. As the unnamed boy confides in the woman, describing his traumatic experiences with abduction, assault, and exploitation, she serves as both listener and confidante. She gives him a safe environment to communicate his innermost worries and weaknesses, comforting him in the middle of his pain.

The woman's cries and howls demonstrate the severity of the boy's agony and the profound influence of his narrative on her psyche. She absorbs his grief, like the patience stone, and carries it inside her while she confronts the inequities of their world. The unnamed woman's outburst in "The Patience Stone" might be regarded as a metaphor for the eventual explosion of the Patience Stone itself. Just as the lady reaches a breaking point and unleashes her pent-up emotions in a flood of fury and despair, the patience stone can ignite and crack open to release accumulated sorrow and adversity. The unnamed woman's frantic footsteps, ranting, and stomping about the room before falling into tears reflect the turmoil growing within her, similar to the patience stone's increasing pressure as it absorbs more and more pain. Her scream, punctuated by slurs and wrath, represents the crushing weight of the obligations she bears, reflecting the stone's impending explosion.

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